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Pushing Boundaries and Exploring Limits:

Ami McKay's *The Birth House* as (Hys)torical Fiction

Judith Mintz

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The Birth House is a deceptively simple novel. According to *The Birth House* website, author Ami McKay moved from Chicago to rural Nova Scotia in 2002 and settled in a century house that originally belonged to a midwife named Mrs. Rebecca Steele,¹ who had cared for pregnant women and the community they inhabited in the early 20th century, before electricity came to the Bay. It was this turn-of-the-century seaside setting, McKay's interest in midwifery, and the roots of the house in which childbirth was once a regular occurrence that laid the groundwork for *The Birth*

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House. Despite its mainstream appeal, this critically compelling novel explores midwifery's painful past through McKay's attempts to address and even contain what Sarah Brophy has called its "haunted history" (np).

How do painful memories and abjected connections both haunt and legitimate the contemporary project of midwifery? This article attempts to answer this question by examining the use of the grotesque and humorous fiction about childbirth as counter-historical practice. While *The Birth House* operates as a form of historical fiction, McKay's primary goal is to draw attention to early 20th-century Euro-Canadian notions of morality and the supposed infallibility of science through representations of the grotesque. *The Birth House* provides a space in which McKay uses binary oppositions to argue for the promotion of midwifery, holistic birthing, and the reclamation of the feminist body through mothering. Through historical fiction, McKay illustrates and capitalizes on historical evidence of the medicalization of

¹ Please see <<http://www.thebirthhouse.com/PS.html>> for further details.

childbirth and women's health in general. The inscription of a woman, a midwife no less, into turn-of-the-20th-century narrative disrupts the national myths of medical and scientific progress.² McKay's central purpose is to show how some women resisted medicalization in a social climate that favoured the hegemony of male-dominated science.

Shannon Carter's recent work distils the main argument of former midwife and birthing revolutionary Mary O'Brien's classic 1981 text, *The Politics of Reproduction*, by pointing out that women's perinatal experience defines their connections with their children, humanity, ancestry, and nature (129, 137). O'Brien appropriates some key Marxist concepts about the notion of alienation from one's own labour, proposing that men have a broken relationship with their sperm (the means of production) as it exits their body. Women, on the other hand, argues O'Brien, have a continuous connection with the fertilized embryo that develops within their bodies into a baby from conception through birth, and, I would add, throughout the duration of the breastfeeding relationship. As a result men are excluded from this relationship and must "create artificial means through which they can mediate the contradictions embedded in their reproductive consciousness" (123).

From O'Brien's logic emerges the argument that men have historically used science and medicine to exert influence over women's bodies, a process that McKay represents in *The Birth House* despite the fact that her work of historiographic fiction is not a literal historical depiction. However, O'Brien's theories are rather dualistic and even essentializing, and it is important to bear in mind feminist historian Wendy Mitchinson's advice not to

² For further research into the medicalization of childbirth and the reemergence of midwifery, please see Judith Mintz, "Midwives Empower Women: Midwifery in Ontario, 1990-2010," Andrea O'Reilly, Ed., *The 21st Century Motherhood Movement: Mothers Speak Out on Why We Need to Change the World and How to Do It*. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2011. 37-49.

reproduce such thinking about the medicalization of childbirth and conflicts between midwives and doctors. How will this approach enable us to understand the culture of the perinatal experience in Canada in a discussion of *The Birth House*? I follow Mitchinson's admonition in the context of the lineage of feminist scholars such as Diana Fuss and Nancy K. Miller, who both draw out the meanings, functions, and histories of essentialism that are at the root of the medicalization and professionalization of childbirth in the early 20th century. Fuss argues that the hegemonic early 20th-century views of women and their bodily processes were interpreted and then arbitrated as being fixed, knowable, and ultimately delicate (25). As a result, men decided what was best for women, rather than women having agency over their own lives and birthing experiences. Thus, although McKay has indeed fallen into a trap of essentialism by representing doctors and midwives as dualistically as Mitchinson advises not to, such Cartesian separations of mind/body and good/bad in *The Birth House* operate to appeal to popular audiences. It seems, then, that McKay reproduces such dualisms through her own binary representation of midwife and doctor.

McKay illustrates her politics through representations of what Julia Kristeva has called the abject, and what Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of medieval writer Rabelais describes as the "grotesque image of the body" (302) and "material lower body stratum" (368). Through a reflection on Bakhtinian and Kristevan theory, I will explore salient features and episodes within *The Birth House* that reflect the feminist politics inherent in a community that is torn between anti-modernity and the notion of scientific advancement. Susan Swan's 1984 novel *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* has been analyzed within a similar framework. As such, reading it together with *The Birth House* enhances the understanding of women, agency, sexuality, marginality, and birthing in an era when European scientific method reigned supreme and so-called objective knowledge was coloured by social constructions of gendered notions of men and

women, as well as the relatively new, statistically based concept of the normal.

Situating *The Birth House*

The crucial themes of *The Birth House*—in particular sexuality, Victorian notions of science, femininity, and the body, as well as the novel's rootedness in the Maritime landscape—render it an important instance of Canadian historical fiction. *Booklist* reviewer Sarah Johnson (2006) evaluated *The Birth House* as being "sensitively written" with "homespun wisdom" (57), and *The Edmonton Journal's* Richard Helm (2007) called it a "smash hit" (B1). *The Birth House* was also reviewed by the Canadian Women's Health Network Information Centre Coordinator, Barbara Bourrier-LaCroix (2006/7), who identified McKay's novel as a "celebration of women's ways of knowing" that reminds readers that "the personal is definitely political" (26). First published in 2006 with many positive and popular reviews, *The Birth House* is now recognized as a noteworthy book by Canada's self-defined cultural mouthpiece, the CBC. In its Canada Reads competition in 2010, British-born, Canadian home decorating maven Debbie Travis championed *The Birth House* into earning a second place award. The populist tone and accessibility of *The Birth House* means that McKay's message can reach large audiences, who in turn can discuss and debate the meanings of these messages in their own lives.

Linda Hutcheon describes the "postmodern condition" as being "characterized by a distrust of 'meta' or 'master' narratives" (15). Further, the postmodern condition demands a deconstruction of assumed "natural" states, an act that contests accepted hegemonies. The very fact that *The Birth House* is about a midwife who stands up to a wealthy and powerful doctor, in often hilarious ways, articulates a contestation of master narratives. McKay challenges history through various textual devices such as intertextuality and the epistolary form that play with realities and fictions (Hutcheon 14; Wylie 139). Through its epistolical form and

post-publication discussions, *The Birth House* allows readers to be active participants in Dora's narrative. It is as though we are standing in Dora's kitchen with her, reading the newspaper articles, advertisements, and letters over her shoulder.

"Local Colour" and Veracity Versus Postmodernity: A Laughing Matter

As mentioned above, Dora Rare is loosely based on a real turn-of-the-century midwife who turned her home into a birthing centre. However, the World War I timeframe, Dora's trip to Halifax to assist in the aftermath of the December 1917 Halifax Explosion, and later exile in Boston during the 1919 influenza epidemic are where much of the historical realism of the novel ends. Georg Lukács argues that the historical novelist should "focus on the general social and cultural milieu rather than on specific historical events," which would suggest that McKay's evocation of local colour is appropriate and contributes to the sense of authenticity in the novel. For Lukács, it matters not whether the writer of historical fiction accurately reproduces historical fact but rather, whether the novel is faithful to the "reproduction of the material foundations of the life of a given period, its manners and the feelings and thoughts deriving from these" (166-167). Interestingly, Toril Moi points out that Lukács "was a major champion of the realist novel," which confounds the definition of *The Birth House* as either postmodern or realist (*Sexual Textual Politics* 4). Both Moi and Hutcheon agree, however, that what makes postmodern feminist historical fiction stand apart from other forms of historical fiction is the notion of challenging totalizing universals that put women into a fixed station. Through her parodic binary oppositions, McKay also questions authority and the "universal" as described by Hutcheon (108).

McKay engages with historical figures and events during Dora's exile in Boston. Here, Dora witnesses for the first time two women who were "enjoying each other with more than the laughter of two sisters" (326). Maxine, the friend with whom Dora

stays and whom she later nurses back to health during the influenza epidemic of 1919, tells Dora, "Let them have their 'Boston Marriage.' ... Even the mother of temperance, Miss Frances Willard herself, had a constant companion in her dear friend Anna" (129). This reference to Willard inscribes Dora, Maxine, and their friends into the realistic milieu of which McKay is writing. As Lukács points out, "the deeper and more genuinely historical a writer's knowledge of a period, the more freely will he be able to move about inside his subject and the less tied will he feel to individual historical data" (167). The point here is that McKay takes her novel further than Lukács had suggested in terms of its political potency. The very suggestion that Willard, a model of true womanhood, could be a lesbian is in and of itself apocryphal to Dora's contemporaries, with the euphemism "Boston Marriage" standing in for the subversive yet socially acceptable same-sex love relationship between two women. Thus, McKay does not only use intertextuality to create authenticity but also repeatedly refers to texts throughout the novel in order to contest heteronormativity through the interplay of these texts.

In her analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin's writings, Julia Kristeva points out that, historically, the goal of carnival was to break down official discourses that censored the common voice ("Word, Dialogue and Novel" 36). One of the narrative devices used in carnival is that of the dialogic (36), which articulates "high and low, birth and agony, food and excrement, praise and curses, laughter and tears" (49). In other words, the powerless talks back to the powerful, challenging formal hierarchies. Kristeva concludes that because "carnavalesque" structure is the antithesis to official authoritative discourse, it is also "anti-Christian and anti-rationalist" (50), which makes itself apparent in dualistic representations of death in childbirth, the church, and sex throughout *The Birth House*. Further, as Michael Holquist asserts in the prologue to Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, "both Rabelais and Bakhtin knew that they were living in an unusual period, a time when virtually everything taken for granted in less

troubled ages lost its certainty, was plunged into contest and flux” (xv).

It is only appropriate, then, that a novel written in the dawn of the new millennium about the beginning of the last century should contain, in its first pages, the declaration made by Dora’s mother: “Things aren’t as certain as they used to be” (22). True to postmodernism’s hallmark contingency and lack of stability, McKay subverts commonly held assumptions about absolute truth. She also sets as a foundation the political, myth-defying conversation between historical and contemporary texts. *The Birth House* is deceptively simple because its subtext pokes fun at serious culture, specifically early 20th century medical discourse.

The laughter of Dora’s friends in the Occasional Knitters Society resonates with the laughter that Bakhtin describes in Rabelais’s marketplace, which functions to subvert the official voice and illustrate the realities behind biomedical discourse. These women unequivocally support Dora’s position as midwife, healer, and friend. Under the pretence of the nation-building project of knitting socks for the war effort, the women of the OKS gather to drink “tea with mitts,” (254) their euphemism for tea enhanced with a wee dram of whisky, a practice handed down from a grandmother. There, they discuss the issues of their sexual relationships, their parenting, and their bodies. Bertine sighs and tells her friends that she does not mind sex but that

I’ve given up trying too hard at it. With Hardy, it’s like one of those carousel rides—you get on and the minute you decide you like the music, it’s a lovely ride ... just when I start to feel like I’m getting someplace, he’s done. (187)

The ribaldry does not stop there. The women cup their own breasts, call each other “whore,” and advise Dora, who desperately wants to conceive a child, to “take it from behind, like a dog,” and that “if you want to enjoy yourself, get up on top. Now there’s a ride” (188). In this scene, the carnival is deliberately invoked to parody the official discourse.

Bakhtin points out that to Rabelais, the carnival and the country fairs often parodied Christian liturgy (7), and I suggest that McKay similarly parodies the official religiosity that prohibited such behaviour. The church of Dora's community, with its Protestant seriousness, proper behavioural code, and conventions, is contrasted sharply with the spirituality espoused by Miss Babineau, Dora's midwife mentor.³ Dora writes that she finds the Reverend at the church in Scots Bay "overbearing and vulgar ... [with a] sore, narrow-eyed look from the pulpit. ... What's worse is the way he's prone to shout and spit, spraying hellfire and tobacco every time he shakes his fist" (78). McKay's grotesque depiction of the Reverend contests the official authority of the church and is further parodied when Dora returns to the church after the service for her mother's Bible, which she had left behind. What she finds in addition to the Bible, however, reveals the truth that confirms Dora's reluctant suspicion about the church:

I spotted two people moving in and out of the shadows of the choir loft. A woman was bent over the railing, her skirts and petticoats lifted high on her back, bouncing. Reverend Norton stood behind her, grasping her hips, shoving his half-naked body hard against hers over and over again. ... There in the church I had found something quite different [than my parents 'stretching the ropes' of their bed] ... I knew I was trespassing on a secret. (80)

The woman whom Dora catches in the sex act turns out to be none other than her ultra- conservative and officious Aunt Fran, who eventually comes to Miss Babineau about her "courses." For Miss B., as Dora fondly calls her, spirituality lies in the divine

³ It is significant that Miss Babineau is associated with many different and even contradictory traditions; for example, she is a midwife and a Catholic, but provides abortions. Suffice it to say here that Miss B. is a counter-hegemonic figure. Further critical discussion on the subject of Miss B.'s identity is beyond the scope of this discussion.

Mother, whose power to save and heal inspires both her and Dora's work as midwives. She begins to pray,

Perfect Mary, Mother of all, bless this house. Save this home from evil. From greed, from sin. Bless this poor, wretched woman, come to me with her pockets and heart lined with sinnin', bless her, Lady, bless this house. (100)

Fran demands that Dora "[s]top telling secrets," when it is she who needs Dora to keep them. To help Fran out of her potentially disastrous predicament, Miss B. uses what she euphemistically refers to in her *Willow Book* as "The Mary Candle."⁴ McKay draws on traditional herbal medicine (384) to illustrate how Miss B. employs both spirituality and plants to circumvent pregnancy. Designed to bring on menses, the Mary Candle is coated with the slippery elm herb, "to loose an angel from her seat." See *Slippery Elm.*" (*The Birth House*, "Notes from the Willow Book"). Miss B. instructs Aunt Fran to "say a prayer to Mary, thank her for her kindness, thank her for the moon, thank her for the tides. You'll be good as new" (*The Birth House* 101). In this instance, the power of Mary, associated with Catholicism, is juxtaposed with the ineffectuality of the Protestant church in Dora's community. Thus, religion signifies the dualistic conflicts between the official authoritative culture and the folk culture, the rational versus spiritual, and the exalted versus the grotesque body.

The Object

Renate Lachman explains that the "double motivation" of laughter is not only to parody official discourse but also to reveal a "second truth" about the "drama of birth, coitus [and] death" (124). Thus,

⁴ *The Willow Book* is Miss B.'s fictional midwife's diary containing herbal recipes and remedies, which she eventually gives to Dora. To add to its aura of authenticity, McKay has formatted *The Willow Book* as an unpaginated appendix to the rest of the novel so it reads like an additional, found text. McKay indicates in her Author's Note (384) that she researched well-known sources for her knowledge of childbirth and midwifery practices, such as Wendy Mitchinson's *Giving Birth in Canada* (2002), and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary 1785-1812* (1990).

while McKay represents bodies in a way that can be understood through Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque, I also draw on Kristeva's concept of the abject in order to draw out the undeniable immediacy of the fleshy, maternal body as it gives birth, sweats, bleeds, and also eventually dies. We can apply Kristeva's abjection theory in the analysis of *The Birth House*, which is about childbirth and midwifery as much as it is about death: the prematurely born baby dies within hours of the first birth that Dora attends, its body rejected before it was even born by its exhausted mother, Experience Ketch.

The abject signifies the rejection of an object by "I" and as such creates a sense of repugnance in the individual who is rejecting the loathsome object (*Powers of Horror* 1). Although the psychoanalytic context is not relevant for the present study, it is nevertheless useful to suggest that McKay articulates the abject in her representations of death in childbirth. For Kristeva, "corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, on the part of death" (3, italics in the original). Being in the presence of a corpse, then, becomes a liminal experience in which those who share that space both affirm their own lives and must deal with the dead body. Kristeva explains abjection as "a failure to recognize its kin," which suggests a simultaneous rejection of the grotesque in an object but also the unclean within the individual (5). It also suggests a refusal to recognize the mutuality of all beings. As Kristeva points out, "there are lives not sustained by desire, as *desire* is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*" (6, italics in the original). In *The Birth House*, Experience Ketch, an exhausted, impoverished, and likely malnourished mother of more than ten children rejects her sickly newborn premature baby, whose chance of survival is thin.

He was a sad, tiny thing. His flesh was like onion skin; the blue of his veins showed right through. If I had looked any harder at his weak little body, I think I might have seen his

heart. Miss B. bundled him up in flannel sheets and handed him to Mrs. Ketch. 'Hold him, now, put your chest to his so he knows what it's like to be alive.' But Experience Ketch didn't want her baby. She didn't want to hold him or look at him or have him anywhere near. 'Get that thing away from me.' (13)

This infant is the first birth that Dora assists. She commits herself to loving the near-dead baby despite his "looking so blue, his arms, his legs, his chest" (14). McKay inscribes the abject as the baby dies in Dora's arms within hours of birth. As if to illustrate Kristeva's point, Brady Ketch, the dead baby's father, "'pinched at the baby's thin, blue cheeks. 'Hey, there, little critter, ain't you gonna say 'hello' to your—' He stopped and pulled his hand away, his curiosity giving way to confusion and then to anger" (16).

Brady realizes that Dora is holding a corpse rather than his son and is quick to blame the midwife. Kristeva describes the abjection of the father that exists, as she puts it, because of the "untouchable, impossible, absent, body of the mother" (6). In unpacking Kristeva's words that seem to blame the mother for the father's abjection, we understand that the untouchable, absent body of Experience is due to her exhaustion, which is the outcome of Brady's abusive sexual demands. She has twelve children and is physically weakened by caring for such a large brood. Through apprenticing with Miss B., Dora learns that midwives put mothers at the centre of childbirth and advocate for the women under their care as she observes Miss B. urging Experience to rest despite Brady's relentless demands that she cook and maintain the house (16-17). In this episode of *The Birth House*, McKay proves it is the mother's physical body that is impossible to deny.

While it is somewhat simplistic to associate the abject with poverty, Brady Ketch symbolizes the origins of the exclusion and untouchability to which Kristeva refers. His vulgar, alcoholic, lewd, and abusive behaviour threatens and eventually destroys

Experience Ketch. Although McKay initially makes the cause of Experience Ketch's death vague, Brady Ketch's guilt is implicated in Experience's weakened state and the baby's premature birth. Their eldest son Tom's description of Experience's pre-term labour and how Brady "made her" milk the goat and muck the stalls despite her pain shows the extent of Brady's abuse (8). Dora's description of the scene is equally graphic: Miss B. tells Experience, "Your blood's weak... This baby has to come today... If you don't birth this child today, all your other babies don't gonna have a mama" (11). Thus, at the beginning of the novel, McKay establishes the tragic context of birthing in an isolated, rural community where there is little prenatal support to protect the mother from an abusive husband or from poverty. Through Dora's query to Miss B. and her subsequent response, McKay suggests that in abject situations such as these, there is nothing to do but pray.

Sarah Brophy points out that the abject is used to disrupt hegemonic understandings of identity and order. As an aging woman, Miss B. unsettles the order into which her community expects her to fit. Using postmodern theories of gender performativity, Brophy's analysis of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters of the 1720s makes explicit how an older woman's refusal to conform to society's expectations of correct behaviour reinforces notions of the abject (3). Thus, the abject in *The Birth House* is that which unsettles and rejects cultural norms while doing away with assumed notions of a clean body. It is also interesting to reflect here that McKay shows how Miss B's prayer could mitigate the discomfort and fear that the abject raises while simultaneously reinforcing suspicion. No amount of Miss B.'s prayer or ritual, however, can change the material reality of perinatal death, and Dora and Miss B. dispose of Experience Ketch's baby by putting him in a coffin and lowering it into a hole in the ground at the base of a tree (19). Birth, Dora reflects, is an inescapable "disgusting mess" that, when met with love, is a miracle (19).

Grotesque Bedfellows: Reading *The Birth House* with *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*

Sally Minogue and Andrew Palmer link Kristeva's notion of the abject with the grotesque in their analysis of representations of abortion in early and mid-20th century fiction, explaining that "abjection is the grotesque of modernity" (105). The problem with this explanation, however, is that a) as a postmodern theorist, Kristeva rejects the modernist notion of the universal body, and b) as described above, the abject is represented by that which unsettles the normative body. Minogue and Palmer draw out the connection between the grotesque and the abject through images of horror depicted in fiction from the 1930s. They suggest that the two concepts can co-exist in a work of fiction: where the grotesque is humorous, the abject is dreadful. *The Birth House* contains the abject as well as the grotesque in its representations of death and merriment. At one point in the novel, for example, McKay gives readers a horrific material corporeality of the open body as a young mother, Iris Rose, dies shortly after giving birth (255), but just four pages later, McKay reveals the hilarity in the grotesque as the now-motherless baby is wet-nursed by women in the community (259).

Margrit Schildrick eloquently expands on the abject and grotesque concepts in her discussion of the mother as monster. The notion of the monster is particularly relevant to this discussion of grotesque because of its manifold binary associations characterizing the impure, disruptive body as disturbing order. I want to emphasize here that not only does McKay suggest that the pregnant body is disruptive, but also that the midwife is rendered monstrous by Dora's community. McKay infuses the figure of the midwife with powers that frighten the inhabitants of Scots Bay, but the midwife is also respected for her power to heal and protect (107). By pointing out the female body as leaky and uncontrollable, Schildrick elucidates the socially constructed fear of pregnancy, childbirth, and the midwives who facilitate these processes perpetuated in Dora's community. As Schildrick points

out, pregnancy threatens order, “marking a monstrous insult to the proper” (31).

In order to explore a parallel example of the monstrous grotesque in historical fiction, *The Birth House* warrants a comparison to Susan Swan’s now-classic postmodern historical novel, *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*. Published in 1983, *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* takes an isolated Nova Scotian community as the starting point of its real-life protagonist, the legendary “giantess” Anna Swan, who lived from 1846 to 1888. Both Smaro Kamboureli and Christopher Gittings employ the Bakhtinian theory of the grotesque and carnival to analyze Swan’s narrative devices. I am here interested in the parallels between *The Biggest Modern Woman* and *The Birth House* in terms of sexuality and the notion of the infallibility of modern science. Swan fictionalizes Anna’s story as an autobiographical reclamation of voice and disarticulation of embodied space. Relevant to this study is Kamboureli’s suggestion that “Anna’s determination to tell her story as a ‘Victorian lady who refused to be inconsequential’ is an affirmation of her individuality, and her way of telling the story is certainly marked by her gender” (np). What connects *The Biggest Modern Woman* thematically to *The Birth House* is the implication in both novels of the monstrous, uncontrollable and non-normative body of which Schildrick writes.

Particularly salient to my analysis here is how, according to Gittings, Anna is conflicted and constricted by her roles as wife and public figure while simultaneously subverting them through the writing of these roles (83). This tension parallels Dora’s conflict and struggle with her relationship with her husband (and to a lesser extent, with her father). For example, Dora wants desperately to be what her community defines as a “good” wife to her husband, Archer, and at the same time, she ultimately evades his aggressively demanding attentions. At the very beginning of the novel, Dora’s father insists that she be moved out of the

family home because “she needs to act like a proper young lady” (42) and must be made to stop being so close with her six brothers, with whom, because of the family’s economic constraints, Dora is required to share a bed.

In *The Biggest Modern Woman*, Anna is disappointed in her marriage because of her husband’s impotence, and writes in her diary,

First, Angus had no idea how to pleasure a woman, and now I have a giant husband with the equipment of an infant. I felt sorry for myself, and even sorrier for Martin, sawing logs beside me. To improve my spirits, I reached down and played with my silken folds until a rain of perspiration drenched the bed sheets. (210)

Anna’s confessional evokes the Bakhtinian carnivalesque in detail. According to Wylie, the “carnavalesque in literature represents a return to a marginalized folk culture as well as a questioning of official culture, subverting its spirit of seriousness and authority” (212). Thus, as Hutcheon points out, although Anna is disappointed, and her loss of voice is ironically undetected by those around her, Swan turns the sadness of Anna’s realization about her new husband into humour and remedies the problem with masturbation (121). What better way to take care of oneself?

Dora manages similarly, and her decision to take her sexuality into her own hands subverts the 19th- and early-20th-century ‘scientific’ assumptions about women’s sexual and mental health. Dora promises Archer that she will no longer practice midwifery, which represents her metaphoric voice, while Anna temporarily loses her voice in the time leading up to her marriage to Martin Bates. Dora’s and Anna’s voices, then, become the metaphor for their agency, which their marital relationships are supposed to sublimate. The remainder of my discussion of Swan’s use of ironic parody throughout the “allegorical layers” of the novel

(Kamboureli) will be juxtaposed with the political implications of ironic parody in *The Birth House*.

In his discussion of *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, Wylie suggests that Susan Swan takes a risk in representing historical figures through fiction, and this claim is supported by the mass of criticism Swan received from distant relatives and “fans” of Anna Swan who were mortified that their public heroine was portrayed as sexual, irreverent, and even promiscuous. Like McKay, Swan uses parody to challenge and subvert literary convention and 19th-century discourse on modernity and women’s sexuality. Anna Swan the giantess struggles both with her identity as well as her physical largeness, sometimes wishing to fit into Victorian sensibilities of the day, while at other times she glorifies her size. As Hutcheon explains, “parody allows women novelists an alternative to silent rejection of male ‘universals.’ ... Parody can also be a weapon against marginalization: it literally works to incorporate that upon which it ironically comments” (121).

Intertext and Parody

Although *The Birth House* focuses on Dora Rare as its single protagonist, through the perspectives of Miss B.’s “Willow Book,” as well as through the correspondence and newspaper clippings, McKay teases out alternate perspectives that could not be easily expressed by an individual personage. After the postpartum death of young Iris Rose Ketch, Dora exiles herself from Scots Bay to Boston to avoid both the suspicion of her community and the ensuing police investigation. The letters she receives from her friends and family exemplify McKay’s use of multiple voices. The historiographic is inherent within *The Birth House* because of the inscription of fictional characters into historic events such as The Halifax Explosion, the First World War, and the Boston influenza epidemic. In addition, the inscription of newspaper clippings and advertisements functions as parody, which is a narrative device Linda Hutcheon articulates as a hallmark of postmodern historiographic metafiction (110).

McKay uses parody through her fictional advertisements for the Swedish Movement Health Generator, a device prescribed by Dr. Thomas for “neurasthenia, greensickness and hysteria” (195). In her Author’s Note, McKay names Rachel P. Maines’ 2001 monograph, *The Technology of Orgasm: “Hysteria,” the Vibrator, and Female Sexual Satisfaction*, as a historical source for the representation of The Swedish Movement Health Generator. McKay’s description of Dora’s use of the vibrator that Dr. Thomas prescribes for what he diagnoses as hysteria is an example of parody and intertextuality in *The Birth House*. Modeled after actual historical advertisements from the early 20th century, McKay’s writing reclaims what Maines called the “social camouflage of the vibrator” (20). Hutcheon explains that

[p]arody—or intertextuality in general—plays an important role in much women’s fiction today, as it seeks a feminine literary space while still acknowledging (however grudgingly) the power of the (male/universal’) space in which it cannot avoid, to some extent, operating. ... Parody is one way of deconstructing that male-dominated culture; its simultaneous use and abuse of conventions that have been deemed ‘universal’ works to reveal the hidden gender encoding. (110)

McKay parodies the vibrator and its pervasive yet subtle and underground presence through the fictional advertisement selling the benefits of an electric motor:

Aids That Every Woman Appreciates ... Home Motor. This motor shown above will operate a sewing machine. Easily attached; makes sewing a pleasure. The many attachments ... may be operated by this motor to help lighten the burden of the home. (Household mixer ... as well as the portable vibrator attachment). (245)

In this instance, through the reference to the vibrator, McKay uses intertextuality to parody and demonstrate how women were targets of advertisements while also being vulnerable to the

condescending manipulations of the established medical discourse. The vibrator is featured in a particularly titillating episode that falls squarely in the middle of the novel, depicting Dora's reluctant but eventual surrender to sexual awakening, unfortunately at the hands (or tool, more accurately) of Dr. Thomas. Dr. Thomas, intent on vanquishing Dora's power, uses the 19th century diagnosis of "neurasthenia, 'a female disorder that presents itself through hysterical tendencies,'" a condition which "is treatable, but not always curable" (194), as well as the vibrator, as tools to render Dora subject to his ministrations and ultimately line his pockets.

Maines points out that such diagnoses would have been lucrative because women were expected to need frequent treatment (4). As Dr. Thomas emphatically urges Dora, "I would advise treatment on a weekly basis, Mrs. Bigelow. Your condition is very advanced. You risk complete emotional and physical debilitation if left unchecked" (198). Dora, on the other hand, is wary of Dr. Thomas's diagnosis and treatment plan, and finds an ad for a personal vibratory device conveniently and discretely located at the back of the *Ladies' Rural Companion* (200); she proceeds to order one for herself so that she can self-administer her treatment and thus reclaim the "physician's domain ... so easily entered into by a lowly midwife" (201). Dora earnestly uses the vibrator with the hope that it will improve her marriage and prepare her womb for pregnancy. Contemporary readers, however, share the ironic and sad joke that no amount of vibration and "womb stimulation" will create a foetus, nor will it help a relationship weakened by violence and sexual abuse. Fortunately, however, Dora also derives a healthy amount of pleasure as a result of her self-treatment, but is arguably conflicted by her path as a midwife and her committed obligation as a wife. While Dora resists many patriarchal expectations that are placed upon her by her community, she continues to accept the doctor's therapy.

The fictional advertisements play a significant role in parodying the variety of ways in which patriarchy creates oppressing systems into which women are forced. They are a prime example of how McKay uses intertextuality. Using the writings of Julia Kristeva to interrogate women's semiotic position and the definition of 'woman,' Toril Moi argues that Kristeva's "deep suspicion of identity" rejects any sense of a distinctly female writing or voice (*Sexual/Textual Politics* 163). This analytical approach is helpful in unpacking McKay's use of intertextuality. According to Moi, it was Kristeva who first "coined the concept of *intertextuality* to indicate how one or more systems of signs are transposed into others" (156). Linda Hutcheon discusses intertextuality within a more practical, rather than theoretical, framework, as it is relevant to Canadian women writers. For Hutcheon, "intertextuality and parody signal a kind of textual collectivity, as well as a textual history: they deliberately recall other texts" (109).

Dora's ordering of the vibrator from the mail-in advertisement exhibits agency in giving herself pleasure, as well as her resourcefulness. This act characterizes Dora as subversive, claiming for herself the pleasure that she deserves. As Hutcheon further points out, intertextuality functions to bring other texts to the mind of the reader. At the end of the Vintage Special Features section, which gives readers of *The Birth House* an appendix of verifiable facts, there is an interview with the book's designer, Kelly Hill, who explains: "I used some actual ads from that time period as inspiration ... since some of the authentic ads were not well designed I was allowed to break some of my own rules for the purposes of authenticity" (6).

McKay also uses irony and parody to comment on gender violence that, as *The Birth House* suggests, was endemic in Scots Bay culture. Bakhtin traces the origins of parody and satire throughout Western culture and contends that laughter is the antidote to terror. The principle of laughter and irony in the grotesque,

Bakhtin points out, originates in “the human soul’s need for joy and gaiety” (35). The characters Brady Ketch (a community member who abuses his wife and purportedly hires his eldest daughter out for sex), Archer Bigelow (Dora’s alcoholic and irresponsible Peter Pan husband), as well as the seemingly genteel Dr. Thomas, who uses emotional manipulation and blackmail to establish power over women, personify this violence throughout the novel. It is folk culture, Bakhtin points out, which turns the terror into something “gay and comic” (39). McKay uses the vibrator, Dora’s innate skills in midwifery, and the Occasional Knitters Society as episodes to mitigate the hardships that the women of *The Birth House* endure on many levels throughout their lives. Hilarity, clowning, and ribaldry subvert the seriousness of scientific rationalism and logical authoritarianism, represented by Dr. Thomas’s character. Interestingly, McKay gives the narration of the following incident to the *Canning Register* rather than to Dora’s diaristic voice. It is worth replicating in its entirety here:

Hysterical Woman Attacks Local Doctor

This writer has learned of an unfortunate event that occurred some time after noon, this Saturday last. According to witnesses, a woman who had gone into Newcomb’s Dry Goods ... became suddenly and inexplicably agitated. In her hysterics, she proceeded to empty a 2-gallon jug of “Sure Sweet Molasses” on the head of Dr. Gilbert Thomas, of Canning.

No other customers were assaulted during the incident.

Mrs. Lila Newcomb, wife of the proprietor of the establishment, had this to say: “I can’t say what happened exactly. All I know is, one minute they seemed to be having a friendly conversation, and the next, Dr. Thomas was standing there, wiping the stuff out of his nose, gasping for air, looking like he’d been tarred for feathering.”

Dr. Thomas, a well-known doctor of women's hygiene and obstetrics, added, "I see no reason to involve the authorities in the matter. Sadly, this kind of behaviour is to be expected from a woman in her condition. Nervous disorders of the female system are more and more common these days. Let this be a lesson to all, showing what can happen when a woman's emotions are left unchecked. I only hope that she will see fit to return to my doorstep so that I might assist her in her time of need, before something dreadful happens, before it's too late."

The woman, who quickly fled from the store to return to her home in Scots Bay, was unavailable for comment. Dr. Thomas paid 25 cents for the molasses. A kind and generous gesture, indeed. (234)

First, the fact that Dora was "unavailable for comment" draws attention to the silencing of the marginalized voice from the dominant discourse. Second, Kristeva's theory of intertextuality is clearly at work here, evident in how the newspaper is an interlocutor with bystanders and readers, both within and without the story. Third, the authoritative voice of scientific knowledge is literally turned on its head by Dora's pouring of the jug of "Sure Sweet Molasses" over Dr. Thomas's arrogance. The irony of the name of the molasses does not go unnoticed, either. The sweetness with which women were expected to behave and which Dora subverts is implicit in her act, labelled by the newspaper as an "assault."

Intertextuality works implicitly with parody here in the form of fictional newspaper articles from *The Canning Register*. Although research turns up no such publication, McKay's fabricated newspaper articles exemplify how journalism creates popular opinion, which in turn explains the mechanism of socially constructed notions of hierarchal binary oppositions. Moi situates this notion of binary opposition in her explanation of one of Helene Cixous's "most accessible ideas" (Moi 104), and it is of

utility in the analysis of *The Birth House*. The fictional newspaper articles illustrate how McKay articulates the mechanics of hegemony through journalism as a complicit acceptance of a dominant ideology. By turning to Cixous's list of binary oppositions such as "Culture/Nature, Father/Mother, Head/Emotions, Intelligible/Sensitive" (Moi 104), we can note how McKay utilizes this framework in order to parody the patriarchal value system at play in small communities in the early 20th century.

Further, Bakhtin articulates the dichotomies present in the juxtaposition of folk culture with official culture, the private with the public, the grotesque with the classic, and the low culture with the high culture. Politically, folk culture functions to sanctify the freedom from hegemonic perspectives, and from "conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and usually 'accepted'" (34). Bakhtin's writing on the grotesque and humour explains not only the popular appeal of such culture but also its connection with death and birth, which he says are in constant flux and "inseparable" (50). Grotesque humour mocks death, or as Kristeva calls it, the abject.

McKay's establishment of "good" midwife Dora versus the "mean and selfish" Dr. Thomas is obviously created with a similar binary in mind. This dualistic theme of the politics of midwifery versus the medicalization of childbirth recurs throughout the novel, and is not limited to the doctor and the midwife. McKay positions Archer and Hart Bigelow as opposites who compete for Dora's attention in contrary ways. Archer, symbolically foreshadowed by Miss B. as "the strength of a hunter's bow," (37) is the aggressive brother who demands sex through violence but is ultimately unable to help Dora conceive a child. The other side of the Janus head is Hart, whose name symbolizes his sensitive, considerate personality, and who

confesses to Dora that he allowed Archer to drown in a boating accident (274).

Conclusion: Defying Labels

Although it may be tempting to deconstruct *The Birth House* into its literary parts, it is more useful to understand it as a novel that illustrates how turn-of-the-20th century midwives fought medicalization processes and attempted to challenge the doctors' social power. Kristeva's concept of the abject, Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque, and close reading of *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* help deepen the understanding of McKay's use of the grotesque, parody, and irony. This close reading of themes and examples of the grotesque body in *The Birth House* illustrates how McKay subverts patriarchal narratives while putting at least some women at the centre of the birthing story to reclaim their agency.

McKay's narrative disrupts the previously accepted notion that doctors are the superior purveyors of health care and, as such, deconstructs masculinist myths of scientific progress.

Interestingly, although McKay disputes widely accepted ideas that hospitalized childbirth is safest and that midwives should be trusted rather than doubted, she uses a literary form that seeks to reproduce and represent authenticity. In McKay's version of the medicalization of childbirth, women fight for agency and remain actors in their birthing experiences rather than being the passive recipients of a doctor's ministrations and advice. Ami McKay's narrative effectively incites action in the form of readers who talk, write, and blog about their interactions with *The Birth House*. By representing the grotesque body, McKay furthers the reconsideration of the heavily faulted notion that science is synonymous with progress and midwives are backward.

Canadians, and not just Canadian women, are talking about birth, bodies, and experience. This conversation is part of women's reclaimed agency in birthing, but there is much more work to be done to achieve birthing justice. 🌀

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